
The episode, writes Petroski, a professor of engineering at Duke University, is a vivid reminder that engineering achievements are often driven by the needs of the day, not simply by the implacable advance of technical knowledge. The man who took up the challenge to American pride was George Washington Gale Ferris, a Pittsburgh engineer. Inspiration, he later said, struck him at a dinner in a Chicago chophouse: "I would build a wheel, a monster."

Ferris's wheel was not entirely original. An English traveler wrote of seeing a "pleasure wheel" in 17th-century Bulgaria, and there were pleasure wheels some 50 feet in diameter in 19th-century America. The 250-foot diameter of the Ferris wheel, however, *was* new. At the fairgrounds, eight 20-foot-square holes, each 35 feet deep, had to be dug and filled with concrete to support the legs of the wheel. The wheel's components were shipped from Detroit in 150 railroad cars. The 45-foot axle—the longest steel shaft ever forged—weighed 45 tons. The wheel had 36 cars, each the size of a trolley car and each capable of seating 40 passengers. The Ferris wheel was a great success. Excited fairgoers were undaunted even by the extravagant price: 50 cents for a 20-minute, two-revolution ride. (A carousel ride cost only a nickel.)

The original Ferris wheel's moment of glory was brief. After the exposition, it was moved to a small Chicago amusement park, but the park did not attract enough visitors to keep the wheel turning. The Ferris wheel was re-erected for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, then abandoned.



Published in 1893 while the Ferris Wheel was still under construction for the world's fair, this sketch provided an advance look at the technological marvel.

The "rusting eyesore" was dynamited in 1906. Ferris himself had died of typhoid fever 10 years earlier. But today Ferris wheels "remain a staple of midways," and Ferris's engineering achievement has given birth to a whole new breed of carnival wonders, including the Wonder Wheel, the Zipper, and the Sky Whirl.

ARTS & LETTERS

Boswell's Botched Life

"The World's Worst Biography" by Donald Greene, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1993), 1811 Q Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Two centuries have passed since the publication of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), and scholars of 18th-century literature, as well

as many other educated people, continue to look upon the work with reverence. Many consider it the finest biography ever written. Greene, a Johnson scholar, emphatically does not.

Boswell (1740–95), he complains, devoted only one-sixth of his *Life* to Johnson's first 54 years, the period of his greatest intellectual activity. Boswell instead preoccupied himself with the final 22 years of the renowned poet, critic,

essayist, and lexicographer—the period after Boswell crossed his path. Even during those years before Johnson's death in 1784, Boswell was hardly the Johnson intimate he is often taken to have been. During eight of the 22 years, the two men did not see each other at all, and the rest of the time they got together an average of only 16 days per year.

How could Boswell "compose primarily from personal recollection the biography of a man whom, for months or years at a time, he never saw or heard from"? His solution was to fill the gaps with "anecdotes of no particular date, picked up from anywhere. . . . Boswell seemed to feel that one of his chief duties was to assemble as many of Johnson's 'smart sayings'

In Defense of the Essay

Novelist Cynthia Ozick laments in *Partisan Review* (No. 2, 1993) that that "shabby" thing, the journalistic article, has all but displaced the literary essay.

Defined, definite, specific—how, what, when, where: the journalist's catalogue and catechism. Naming generates categories and headings, and categories and headings offer shortcuts—like looking something up in the encyclopedia, where knowledge, abbreviated, has already been codified and collected. [Henry] James's way, longer and slower, is for knowledge to be detected, inferred, individually, laboriously, scrupulously, mazily [sic]—knowledge that might not be found in any encyclopedia.

"I had rather be a journalist, that is the essence of it"—hark, the cry of the common culture. Inference and detection (accretion heading toward revelation) be damned. What this has meant, for literature, is the eclipse of the essay in favor of the "article"—that shabby, team-driven, ugly, truncated, undeveloped, speedy, breezy, cheap, impatient thing. . . .

Now and then you will hear a writer (even one who does not define herself as a journalist) speak of her task as "communication," as if the meticulous making of a sentence, or the feverish uncovering of an idea, or the sting of a visionary jolt delivered by what used to be called the Muse, were no more artful than a 10-minute telephone conversation. Literature may "communicate" (a redundancy, even a tautology), but its enduring force, well past the routine of facile sending and receiving, is in the consummation, as James tells us, of

life, interest, importance. Leviathan rises to kick away the pebble of journalism.

Yet the pebble, it seems, is mightier than Leviathan. The 10-minute article is here, and it has, by and large, displaced the essay. The essay is gradual and patient. The article is quick, restless, and brief. The essay reflects on its predecessors, and spirals organically out of a context, like a green twig from a living branch. The article rushes on, amnesiac, despising the meditative, reveling in gossip and polemics, a courtier of the moment. Essays, like articles, can distort and lie, but because essays are under the eye of history, it is a little harder to swindle the reader. Articles swindle almost by nature, because superficiality is a swindle. Pessimists suppose that none of this is any longer reversible. That the literary essay survives in this or that academic periodical, or in a handful of tiny quarterlies, is scarcely to the point. It has left the common culture. . . .

Poetry and the novel will continue to go their own way, and we can be reasonably confident that they will take care of themselves. But the literary essay needs and merits defense: defense and more—celebrants, revivification through performance. One way or another, the literary essay is connected to the self-conscious progression of a culture, whereas the essay's flashy successor—the article, or "piece"—is in every instance a pusher of Now, a shaker-off of whatever requires study or patience, or what used to be called, without prejudice, ambition. The essayist's ambition is no more and no less than that awareness of indebtedness . . . indebtedness to history, scholarship, literature, the acutest nuances of language.

as he could lay his hands on, with little concern, by modern biographical standards, for verifying their authenticity." Often, Boswell sought to "improve" Johnson's remarks. One of Johnson's best-known "sayings," as reported by Boswell in the *Life*, is, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life, for there is everything in London that life can afford." But according to Boswell's own journal, all that Johnson actually said was, "You find no man wishes to leave it."

Boswell did not trouble himself to indicate the sources of many of his assertions. "Were I to detail the books which I have consulted and the inquiries which I have found it necessary to make by various channels," Boswell proclaimed, "I should probably be thought ridiculously ostentatious. Let me only observe, as a specimen of my troubles, that I have sometimes been obliged to run over half London, in order to fix a date correctly." Such proclamations have persuaded many readers of what Virginia Woolf called Boswell's "obstinate veracity." But skepticism is warranted, Greene maintains. Boswell, for example, did not bother to "run over" to Oxford University to check the enrollment records, and so he wrote that Johnson left Pembroke College in 1731, when he actually left in 1729.

Boswell, in short, was no Boswell. His *Life* may not be the world's worst biography—it is certainly beautifully written—Greene concludes, but it is "[the] worst among major biographies still used as serious guides to their subjects' lives and works."

Two Unnaturalists

"Farrell's Ethnic Neighborhood and Wright's Urban Ghetto: Two Visions of Chicago's South Side" by Robert Butler, in *Melus* (Spring 1993), 272 Bartlett Hall, Dept. of English, Univ. of Mass. at Amherst, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Critics have often pigeonholed novelists James T. Farrell (1904–79) and Richard Wright (1908–60) as "naturalistic" writers, who employ documentary techniques in the service of grimly deterministic visions. Examining their best-known works—Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–34–35), and Wright's *Native Son* (1940), both set in Chicago—Butler, a professor of English at

Canisius College, Buffalo, New York, concludes that the label does not fit.

In *Native Son*, Butler points out, Chicago appears as "a gothic mindscape reflecting the fear and horror that dominate [the] life" of Wright's black protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Because Wright wanted to filter "external experience through Bigger's radically alienated consciousness," he substituted grotesque imagery for naturalistic description of the city's streets, houses, stores, schools, and other landmarks. On his way to draft a ransom note, Bigger perceives street lamps as "hazy balls of light frozen into motionlessness"; after a brutal murder, deserted buildings look like "empty skulls," their windows "gap[ing] blackly like . . . eye sockets." Wright's Chicago, Butler writes, "is a place defined by absences, dark nights, empty streets and abandoned buildings that become a powerful symbol of 'a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished.'"

The South Side of Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, which is about an Irish-American youth's tragically wasted life, is very different, "an ethnic neighborhood presented in a complexly ambivalent way," Butler notes. "While it can indeed be a dead end to those who succumb to what Farrell . . . called 'spiritual poverty,' it can also be the setting for human liberation." Farrell uses standard realistic techniques that present the city, in all of its harshness, in concrete detail, and also uses poetic techniques that "lyrically suggest the surprisingly rich human possibilities contained in such a world." At the end of *Young Lonigan*, the first novel in the trilogy, Studs Lonigan looks out his bedroom window, "watching the night strangeness, listening. The darkness was over everything like a warm bed-cover, and all the little sounds of night seemed to him as if they belonged to some great mystery." The better angels of Studs's nature still find encouragement in the city. "Thus," Butler writes, "the street corners, pool rooms, and bars that threaten to trap Studs Lonigan are consistently contrasted with the parks that allow him to relax, free his mind, and envision a better life for himself."

As Studs's prospects narrow, Butler observes, Farrell's "realistic descriptions of the city become more prevalent to dramatize Studs's plight." Yet lyrical images persist "to suggest